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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000785

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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE'S MADRASAHS STRUGGLE TO STAY RELEVANT

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[1](#)B. 05 SINGAPORE 1835

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Singapore's full-time private Islamic schools, or madrasahs, are facing an existential crisis. Within the Malay/Muslim community, many question the quality, purpose, and continuing relevance of the full-time madrasahs in Singapore's highly competitive, secular society. The madrasahs are currently undergoing a GOS-driven curriculum revision aimed at improving quality, but progress is slow, and greater structural overhaul will be necessary for full-time madrasahs to attract more than a small percentage of Muslim students. End summary.

Singapore,s Madrasahs

[1](#)2. (U) Singapore has six full-time madrasahs, which spend approximately equal amounts of time teaching religious and secular subjects. They serve roughly 5 percent of school-age Malay/Muslims. (Note: Malay/Muslims represent 15 percent of Singapore's total population. End Note.) The majority of Malay/Muslim students attend Singapore's well-respected public schools and go to weekend or evening religious classes at 27 part-time madrasahs associated with local mosques. Traditionally, the full-time madrasahs have served the more conservative elements of the Malay/Muslim population. Parents who want their children to focus on religious studies, even at the expense of secular education, send them to full-time madrasahs. When headscarves were banned from public schools in 2002, some parents chose to enroll their daughters in full-time madrasahs rather than send them to public schools without headscarves.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Two of the six full-time madrasahs are well-respected for the quality of their religious and secular education: Madrasah Al-Maarif (an all-girls school) and Madrasah Aljuneid, which has a close connection with the respected Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Al-Azhar bases a representative in Aljuneid to recruit students for tertiary education. The other four madrasahs focus more narrowly on religious studies and are seen to offer a relatively poor education in secular subjects, according to our contacts. One of them, Madrasah Al-Irsyad, has a history of Saudi connections and accepted a large donation from the visiting Saudi Crown Prince in 2006 (Ref A). The school administration recently hired several new teachers and it now serves as the pilot school for a new curriculum (see para 4). Another underperforming madrasah, Al-Arabiah, is known for its Saudi-educated religious scholars and Wahhabi influence. (Note: While Wahhabism is not officially banned in Singapore, it is unofficially discouraged. End note.)

Improving Madrasah Quality

¶4. (SBU) Ever mindful of the need to maintain ethnic and religious harmony, the Government of Singapore (GOS) has long been concerned about the gap in educational and economic performance between Singapore's Malay/Muslims and its ethnic Chinese and Indian communities. Following the discovery of a home-grown, Malay/Muslim terrorist plot in late 2001, the GOS became more focused on the need to close that gap to help prevent radical influences from taking hold. In addition to paying closer attention to how the madrasahs operate, the GOS began to implement measures designed to raise standards.

¶5. (SBU) In 2003, in order to force madrasah reform, the GOS decreed that madrasah students would have to pass the government-mandated Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) beginning in 2008. The Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), the Singapore government statutory board for Malay/Muslim affairs that oversees Islamic education, launched a curriculum revision program in 2001 to make it more interactive and engaging and to better prepare madrasah students for the PSLE. MUIS contracted with the Chicago-based IQRA Foundation to design the new curriculum.

Skeptical Audience

¶6. (U) Despite good intentions, curriculum reform has bogged down due to MUIS' shifting priorities and internal debates over the scope of change, according to multiple contacts working on the project. Moreover, the effort appears to face an uphill battle convincing the Malay/Muslim community that the new curriculum will significantly raise academic performance. One journalist questioned the ability of madrasahs to teach satisfactorily both the secular and

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Islamic subjects; he noted that the school day has already been extended to eight hours in some madrasahs in an attempt to cover all the material. Some of our contacts also thought older teachers might resent what they view as government interference and resist implementing the new curriculum.

¶7. (SBU) The chief executive officer of Madrasah Al-Irsyad confidently predicted that his historically low-achieving students would have no trouble passing the PSLE. However, a local mosque manager noted that the test was so easy that if the madrasah students could not pass it, the madrasahs did "not deserve to stay open." A prominent Malay/Muslim journalist agreed with this assessment, noting that the madrasahs are required to achieve only the average score in English, mathematics, and science of the six lowest-performing public schools. According to press reports, the government will require failing students to transfer to higher-achieving madrasahs or public schools.

Purpose and Relevance

¶8. (SBU) Some in the Malay/Muslim community still question whether the madrasahs should be held to the same standards as the public schools. Underlying that question is an even more fundamental debate over the purpose of Singapore's full-time madrasahs. MUIS has declared that madrasahs should prepare every student for a future "as a forward-thinking religious leader or a professional in another field of his choice." On the other hand, a mosque manager argued that madrasahs should produce only religious scholars and teachers, and that Singapore only needs two madrasahs to meet the religious teaching needs of the small Muslim community; students interested in secular careers should attend public schools, he added.

¶9. (U) A number of young, educated Malay/Muslim community volunteers told us they would not send their own children to full-time madrasahs. One observed that doing so would limit

the child's future job opportunities. Like many other Muslim parents, he will send his pre-school-age child to a public school, where she will receive an excellent secular education, and to part-time religious classes in the evening or on weekends.

Comment

¶10. (C) Concerns about an ethnic performance gap and the potential for radical influences ensure the GOS will continue to pay close attention to the madrasahs and their reform. Faced with a 2008 deadline for meeting minimum standards, some of the full-time madrasahs appear to be making a serious effort, but doubts remain whether others will be able to improve secular courses sufficiently while maintaining their heavy focus on religious education. Even if some of the madrasahs fail next year,s exams, the GOS will find a way to keep enough of them open to satisfy demand. While it hopes to boost the academic achievements of Singapore's Malay/Muslim community, the GOS may face a choice between academic performance and driving Singapore,s relatively moderate madrasahs underground or across the border. It will likely opt for keeping the madrasahs open under close watch. End comment.
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